Fifty Words to the Wise: The Mini-Saga in Class

By Anna Luczak and Danuta Stanulewicz

As suggested by the title of this article, a mini-saga has exactly 50 words, 50 words that can be used effectively in class in a variety of ways. The title can have an additional 15 words. A mini-saga should tell a story, that is, it cannot describe a mood or some beautiful scenery only. We would like to present a few mini-sagas as well as some activities based on them.

The first mini-sagas were written in Britain in 1982 when *The Sunday Telegraph Colour Supplement Magazine* introduced the concept of a mini-saga and announced the first mini-saga competition. This type of story has been popularized in language teaching by Stephen Keeler, who decided to use it in published ELT materials and has run mini-saga workshops and competitions in several countries, as well as by *Practical English Teaching* , a British quarterly for teachers of English (not issued anymore), which published Stephen Keeler's article on using mini-sagas in class in 1986 and also ran a mini-saga competition two years later.

Why Use the Mini-saga in Class?

Having learnt about the mini-saga from *Practical English Teaching* , both of us tried it out in class and found that this type of story was great to use, not only with children, but also with adult beginners and pre-intermediate students. The reason was simply that our students enjoyed this type of story.

Because mini-sagas are relatively short, students rarely get tired of reading them. Moreover, such short texts allow the teacher to introduce a convenient layout, which makes the story easier to understand. Mini- sagas may also serve as a springboard for a lively discussion or a starting point for a variety of other interesting activities. The teachers may get students to write mini-sagas of their own. Again, 50 words of homework or composition in class will not tire them. The idea of making up mini- sagas will be especially welcome to students who like creative writing. Another advantage is that the requirement imposed by the number of words teaches discipline in writing. Finally, the teacher may run a class or school mini-saga competition.

The Layout of a Mini-saga

The following shows two alternative ways a story could be presented. It is not difficult to see which of them is easier to read for children as well as adult beginners.

1. A Story About a Sailor

There was once a sailor who thought that the Earth was flat. He wanted to discover new continents. He sailed south. Then he sailed west. Next he sailed north. After many days at sea, he saw land. "I have discovered a new continent!" But it was only his own village.

2. A Story About a Sailor

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who thought
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"I have discovered a new continent!"
But it was only his own village.

A mini-saga is short enough to be divided into lines of varying length, containing either short sentences or parts of longer sentences. The second layout of the mini-saga about the sailor not only facilitates the understanding of the story, but makes it more dramatic.

Using Mini-sagas in Class

At the beginning teachers may choose to introduce new words and expressions. But this should not be made too easy for the students: If the meaning of a word or expression could be inferred from the context, it usually does not need any explanation beforehand. If possible, the teacher should show the learners a picture or photograph illustrating the topic of the mini-saga, which will not only help them understand the story, but also create the mood. Students should describe the picture. For instance, for the mini-saga about the sailor, the teacher should try to find a picture or photograph of a man in a boat and show it to the students while asking these questions:

Where's the man?
What's his job?
What's he doing?

If the students do not happen to know the English words for the principal directions, the teacher may draw a compass rose on the blackboard and use it to introduce them.

Next, students should read the mini-saga silently. After they finish reading, the teacher may ask them a few questions, bearing in mind that this could spoil the pleasure of reading. Stephen Keeler (1986:24) warns against using conventional comprehension questions. After reading the

mini-saga presented above, the teacher may get the students to answer one of the following questions:

Why did the sailor reach his own village?
Why didn't he discover any new continent?

The next activity could be pair work. The teacher may divide the class into pairs and ask the learners to make up a dialogue connected with the story. For the mini-saga about the sailor, it could be an interview with the sailor, which means that one of the learners in a pair is the sailor, and the other a journalist or a TV reporter. Sometimes the teacher will have to help the learners prepare such a dialogue, which might consist of making up the dialogue together with them and writing it on the blackboard. In this case, the learners reproduce it later in pairs.

At the end of the lesson, the students reproduce or retell the story, continue it, and discuss the topic it focuses. The story about the sailor may serve as a starting point for talking about traveling. The teacher may ask the learners the following questions:

Would you like to travel around the world?
If so, what countries/cities/places/etc. would you like to visit and why?
How would you like to travel?
Children may illustrate the mini-saga they have just read or continue it with their own drawings.

Other Activities: Filling in the Blanks

One of the activities we would like to propose consists of filling the blanks. Here is an example of a mini- saga with fourteen words missing (twelve in the story and two in the title):

A _____ _____
There was a _____
traveling on a _____.
There was a _____
traveling on the same _____.
She was _____.
He was_____ a _____.
He looked at her.
She seemed _____ and _____.
Before getting off the _____.
he slipped a _____ _____
into the pocket of her coat.

The mini-saga which the above activity is based on tells about a girl and a boy traveling together on a train:
A Red Lollipop
There was a girl

traveling on a train.
There was a boy
traveling on the same train.
She was asleep.
He was reading a book.
He looked at her.
She seemed sad and tired.
Before getting off the train,
he slipped a red lollipop
into the pocket of her coat.

In another activity the teacher asks the students to make up or guess the punch line. In the mini-saga below the last nine words are missing:

John and his Dinosaurs

John designed several dinosaurs
on his computer.
He also designed a beautiful park
for them.
At first
the dinosaurs looked harmless.
But soon
they got out of control.
They destroyed the park
and started to fight.
Suddenly
they looked at John.
_____ _____ _____ _____
_____ _____ _____ _____ _____

The missing lines read as follows:

John had no choice.
He turned the computer off.

In both activities presented above, our students often come up with more interesting or amusing ideas than the ones in the original mini-sagas.

Other Activities: Guessing the Plot

The teacher shows the students two or three pictures illustrating a mini-saga and asks them in pairs to guess the plot and write a mini-saga of their own. For example, the mini-saga presented below could be illustrated with pictures of a girl in a park, a ticket, autumn leaves, and a magpie. The teacher presents the picture to the students and asks them to make up a story. After the stories are ready, the students are given the original mini-saga to compare with their versions.

Who Can Help Peggy?

Peggy lost the only ticket
she had.
"How will I get home?"
she thought
as she was looking for it
among colourful leaves.
Suddenly
she saw a magpie.
It was sitting in a tree
with the ticket
in its beak.
"Don't worry, Peggy.
I haven't punched it yet."

In the mini-saga above, we use *don't* and *haven't* . The word count for them is two (not one).

The teacher may also ask students to reconstruct the story, giving them a list of key words. In the case of the mini-saga about Peggy, the key words could include the following:

Peggy lose ticket
get home?
look for
colourful leaves
see magpie
sit tree
ticket beak
not worry
punch

A Final Word

Our aim in writing this article was to encourage teachers to use mini-sagas in class as well as to give examples of activities based on this type of story. Our approach to exploiting mini-sagas in foreign language teaching is based on two assumptions. First, reading should be enjoyable (at least from time to time). Second, mini-sagas should be seen as a springboard for creative use of English. Follow-up activities should include making up dialogues as well as writing stories. After reading and discussing several mini- sagas, learners are familiar with this genre. At this point, the teacher can get them to write their own mini- sagas. As mentioned before, the teacher could run a class mini-saga competition once a month or a school competition once a semester. Students may also write a mini-saga reflecting each unit from their course book. Finally, we would like to encourage readers to write mini-sagas for their students. Once teachers start writing, they can't be stopped!

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